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Henry Waxman to retire from Congress after 40 years

by Jonah Lowenfeld

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Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA) in Washington on Dec. 11. Photo by REUTERS/Joshua Roberts

Rep. Henry Waxman (D – Beverly Hills), who was first elected to Congress in 1974 in a post-Watergate wave of fresh candidates, announced on Thursday morning that he will not seek reelection in the fall and will retire from Congress at the end of this year.

In a statement, Waxman expressed gratitude for the chance to spend four decades in Congress, working to advance legislation protecting the environment, securing essential rights for gays and women, and strengthening the ties between the United States and Israel.

Waxman's legislative accomplishments have included passing laws making pharmaceutical products more affordable for Americans, improving air and water quality in American cities, and expanding health coverage to all Americans.

The 20-term Congressman made special mention of his work to advance the U.S.-Israel relationship, recalling the times he and his wife visited Israel to greet President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and to witness the arrival of the airlift carrying Ethiopian immigrants to the Jewish state. Waxman's daughter lives in Israel, and he said he has taken "pride" in his grandchildren's serving Israel as members of the Israel Defense Forces.

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The reaction from the Los Angeles community he has served for 40 years was swift and heartfelt.

"I'm very sad that he's leaving, because, to me, he represents the very, very best of Congress," Rabbi John Rosove, senior rabbi of Temple Israel of Hollywood said. Rosove has known Waxman for 40 years, since the days when Waxman, then a California Assemblyman, and Rosove, then a rabbinical student, both prayed at the Westwood Free Minyan at UCLA.

He's a mensch; he's honest, he was always looking out for quality of life and for the needs of the people," Rosove said. Jewish groups in the Beltway -- where Waxman was known as "the dean of the Jewish delegation" to Congress" -- praised him for his accomplishments.

"Henry Waxman has devoted his career to fulfilling the Jewish concept of tikkun olam - repairing the world," William Daroff, senior vice president for public policy and director of the Washington office of The Jewish Federations of North America said in a statement. "In ensuring the safety of food and drugs, working to promote affordable health care, and being a stalwart leader in building a strong US-Israel relationship, Congressman Waxman has been a champion of Jewish communal concerns."

Democratic colleagues in the House also lavished praise on Waxman on Thursday. "His hand can be seen in almost every domestic achievement of the last few decades," Rep. Adam Schiff (D - Burbank) said in a statement. "Along with the departure of Howard Berman last year, California and indeed the whole Congress, have lost two of the strongest pillars of policy-making in the domestic and foreign policy realms."

Waxman's departure comes on the heels of the the defeat in 2012 of Howard Berman by fellow Democratic Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Sherman Oaks) ; the careers of Waxman and Berman not only paralleled one another's, but their political fortunes also were closely connected. Waxman was elected to the California Assembly in 1968, and Berman joined him in Sacramento four years later. Waxman won a seat in Congress in 1974; Berman made the jump to Washington after winning an election in 1982.

So great was their influence over California Democratic politics for decades that the alliance became known as the "Waxman-Berman machine."

"A Waxman-Berman blessing could make a political career," Shane Goldmacher wrote in the National Journal in January 2013. "The two dished out campaign cash, forged alliances, drew districts for friends (and themselves), and developed microtargeting techniques before a word for it even existed."

But with changing demographics, a new citizen-led manner of drawing California's Congressional districts, and the diffusion of advanced political strategies and technologies, the Waxman-Berman machine influence was on the wane by 2012, when Waxman faced his toughest electoral challenge, from Bill Bloomfield, a self-funded independent candidate.

In a statement released on Thursday, Rep. Steve Israel (D - N.Y.), who chairs the Democratic Congressional Committee Chairman, expressed confidence that California's 33rd congressional district "will elect a thoughtful, problem-solving Democrat in Representative Waxman's tradition in this overwhelmingly Democratic seat."

Attorney Sam Yebri, who "first got the political bug" as an intern working in Waxman's district office in Los Angeles in 2000, said that for young Iranian-American Jews like himself, who have never been represented by any congressman other than Waxman, his retirement feels like "the end of an era."

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"It's extremely troubling to think that next year, there will no longer be a Congressman Waxman, a Congressman Berman representing us," said Yebri, who is president and founder of 30 Years After, a group that organizes the younger generation of Iranian-American Jews in Los Angeles. "They have firsthand knowledge of the importance of the U.S.-Israel relationship, of the Iran sanctions work."

"All we can do now," Yebri added, "is hope that we can build those same types of relationships with our next representative."

Whoever is elected to fill Waxman's seat in November will be joining a Congress that has passed fewer laws in the past year than in any other year in history, and whose collective job-approval rating is just 13 percent. The current Congress has been riven both by partisanship and by a hyper-factionalism that threatens to divide the controlling Republican Party.

in his statement Thursday, Waxman made clear Thursday that he has been frustrated by the way Congress works today.

"I abhor the extremism of the Tea Party Republicans," Waxman said in the statement. "I am embarrassed that the greatest legislative body in the world too often operates in a partisan intellectual vacuum, denying science, refusing to listen to experts, and ignoring facts."

But Waxman said he is retiring in order to offer someone else "the chance to make his or her mark," and not because he doubts the Democrats' ability to retake control of the House, or out of frustration with Congress. Indeed, Waxman said he wouldn't trade any part of his four-decade career.

"I will always be grateful for this honor and privilege," he said in the statement.

His complete statement is [here](#).

Staff writer Jared Sichel contributed to this report.

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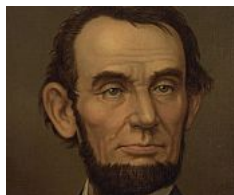
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